



Helping Hands

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DENTAL CARIES “CAVITIES”

Dental caries is a medical term for tooth decay or cavities. It is the number one chronic childhood disease and is five times more common than asthma. It is caused by specific types of bacteria that produce acid that can destroy the tooth’s enamel and the layer under it, the dentin. Many different types of bacteria live in the human mouth. In fact, there are more bacteria in your mouth than people on earth. They build up on the teeth in a sticky film called plaque. This plaque also contains saliva, bits of food and other natural substances. It forms most easily in certain places. These Include:

- Cracks, pits or grooves of the back teeth (molars)
- Between teeth
- Around dental fillings or bridgework
- Near the gum line.

Some of the plaque bacteria turn sugar and carbohydrates in the foods we eat into acids. These acids dissolve minerals in the hard enamel that covers the tooth. The enamel erodes or develops pits, which are too small to see at first but rapidly get larger. This acid can seep through the tiny pores in the enamel, which begins to break down the main body of the tooth, forming a cavity. If the cavity is not treated bacteria will get into the tooth’s inner layer, where sensitive nerve fibers are. Early cavities may not have any symptoms. Once the decay has eaten through the enamel, the teeth may be sensitive to sweet, hot or cold foods or drinks.



Cavities may be curable, or not, depending on when they are found. Cavities that are limited to the hard enamel layer may be reversed if acid damage is stopped early, and the tooth is given a chance to repair with the help of adequate fluoride exposure. Caries that have destroyed enamel cannot be reversed. Most will continue to get worse and go deeper into the tooth. With time, the decay may go deep into the root, possibly needing a root canal, or extraction of the tooth. How long this process takes will vary from person to person.

Prevention

- The best way to prevent cavities is by brushing twice a day and flossing once a day to remove plaque between the teeth and the gum line. You should also:
- Have regular dental check-ups. The mouths of children and adolescents are continually growing and changing, therefore we recommend evaluations every six months. Preventative care can help stop problems from occurring and keep minor problems from becoming major ones.
- Eat a well-balanced diet that limits starchy or sugary foods. When you do eat these foods try to eat them with your meal instead of as a snack to minimize the number of times your teeth are exposed to acid. We recommend 3 meals and two snacks a day with water in between to help flush out bacteria in your mouth.
- Use dental products that contain fluoride, including toothpaste. Dentists can paint a fluoride varnish on children's teeth to protect them.
- If you chew gum, make sure it is a sugar free gum. Chewing gum that contains Xylitol helps decrease bacterial growth and strengthens teeth.
- If the tooth is a healthy tooth, the permanent molars can be protected with sealants.

Dental caries is a process, in its early stages tooth decay can be stopped and even reversed. Only regular professional examinations and X-rays can detect early trouble. We recommend check-ups twice a year to help maintain the health of your teeth and overall oral health.